



DEALING WITH CONTROVERSY



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Overleaf:
Kirby Atan; Imagine; sculpture, bronze; Glenwood Regional
Medical Center; McMillan Road, Monroe, Louisiana

Dealing with Controversy

Controversy is likely to come up in a vital public art program. Although it may present challenges for programs and administrators, controversy can also be a healthy sign of an interesting program that engages the community. Successful programs and administrators learn to manage and control controversy and even use it to their advantage.

In some cases, controversy may be about the content of the art, but it is often about something else altogether, sometimes even something that no one will publicly acknowledge. Public art programs as well as individual projects and expenditures can become the lightning rods for other community issues or concerns. When controversy does occur, having a comprehensive understanding of the situation will help programs and administrators make the right choices to defuse it.

Preventive Measures

Administrators can prepare for controversy by establishing credibility and support for the program before controversies occur. This can be accomplished by cultivating good relationships with various constituencies, the media, and public

officials. Choose effective spokespersons, get as many people involved in the program as possible, and try to make sure that everyone's experience with the program is a positive one.

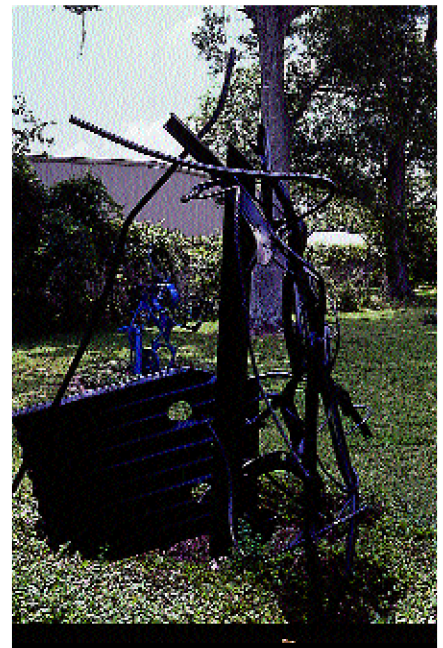
Establish and maintain credibility

Establishing and maintaining credibility with the arts community, elected officials, and the public is the most effective way to weather almost any controversy. This is accomplished by ensuring that the entire public art process is open, fair, aboveboard, and easily understood. Public art administrators should keep open books and maintain an open-door policy at all times. Some intricacies of public art such as funding and artist selection are complex and not easily explained in five-second sound bites. Time that administrators and supporters spend with people, one-on-one, explaining the public art process is time well spent.

Cultivate good media relations

If you have a good relationship with media representatives, they will feel comfortable calling to ask or inform you about potentially controversial situations before they get out of hand. Print media representatives in particular can be effective in explaining the complexities of a controversial situation to the public. Public art programs have an interesting story to tell, and the media always need good stories.

Linda Benglis; Odd's & And's #2, sculpture
204 W. Sallier Street, on the grounds of
the Imperial Calcasieu Museum, Lake
Charles, Louisiana



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Cultivate good relationships with area elected officials

It is important to have good relations not only with city representatives (mayor, council members, etc.) but also with state and national elected officials, even if they are not directly involved with the funding of your program or if the geographic location of your projects is not in their jurisdiction. A supportive statement from a respected elected official will go a long way toward diffusing a negative situation. Bring elected officials into the loop early and often as your program and projects develop. No one is more supportive of a successful installation than a public official who can claim credit for it.

Choose potential spokespersons carefully

Choose representatives for your agency's board, the public art advisory committee, and juries with an eye to their potential effectiveness with different audiences. This is certainly not the only criterion for selecting board, committee, and jury members, but it is something to consider, particularly if an upcoming project has the potential for controversy. Administrators and their programs will be well served by selecting board members, advisory committee members, and jury members who can present a united front—and even take the public lead—in the event of controversy.

Seek broad community involvement

Involve as many people as possible in your public art program, and create as many different opportunities as possible for public interface. The number of people involved and the variety of their interactions with a

program—from public meetings, workshops, exhibits, and the jury process to the involvement of local businesses in fabrications and installations—will bring added credibility and support that can be crucial in times of controversy. Also keep in mind that when there is a controversy, people who have interacted with your program may be allies only if their experiences have been positive ones. Keep the lines of communication open with everyone that has been involved in the program, ask for feedback, and implement suggestions whenever appropriate.

When Controversy Happens

Even when programs and administrators take appropriate steps to gain public support, controversy can still happen. What's next? There is no uniform way to handle controversy, but a few general principles apply: gather as much information as possible, seek the advice and support of colleagues in other programs, make a plan and act accordingly, and move on.

What's the issue?

Identify what the issues are—distinguish between artistic issues and those that are transferred from some other agenda. If someone objects to an element of artwork such as an exposed body part or an offensive symbol, the issue is artistic. An example of a “transferred” objection is a complaint about the expenditure on public art when, the objector believes, the money could be spent fixing potholes or hiring more police.

These two types of objections must be treated differently. A response to artistic objections should begin with

an explanation of the public art process and the selection of artists and projects by a jury; include as many specifics as necessary. Emphasize the program's commitment to the benefits of public art in the community and its confidence in giving the artist a role to play. The right to artistic expression and First Amendment issues may also come into play. Express appreciation for the objecting constituency's interest in the piece in question, but emphasize that public art projects are developed through a fair and credible process of community involvement. Point out the variety of projects, media, and styles of expression that are supported by public art, and encourage those who don't care for one installation or project to look for things they like in your program's other projects. Take objections seriously and take the time to address them with sincerity and conviction. When you've done that, move on—don't get consumed in trying to address the same issues again and again.

"Transferred" issues often involve a limited understanding of how public art programs are funded. Funds that support capital expenditures (such as public art, if the program's funding is tied to municipal bond expenditures) are different from operating funds that support ongoing expenditures. Some people may not understand that the two are not interchangeable. A public art program does not take away funds from city services such as trash removal, police protection, or street maintenance.

Elected officials may be able to help by addressing "quality of life" issues. Politicians can often speak convincingly about their interest in improving the quality of life for their constituents: less crime, safer communities, more attractive places to live and work, increased access to parks and open-space amenities, etc. Public art advocates should acquaint elected officials with how public art addresses these quality of life issues so that they will have more specific information at their disposal when these issues arise.

Do the right thing

It's important to avoid letting controversy override the jury process established by your program. Situations that seem insignificant at first can snowball quickly. But if a project is hopelessly troubled by external confusion or realities that appear insoluble, administrators should rely on professional instinct, respected advice, credible information, and community experience. Sometimes a program must cut its losses, regroup, and move on. The greater good of the agency, its public art program, and community interests must be considered. Don't let a single controversy bring down your program. Take stock and consider what lessons can be learned and what steps can be taken in the future. All of us who support public art are likely to encounter controversy at some point, and we all can learn from and support each other. We're all in this together!